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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study investigated one group of non-mainstream (low socioeconomic status) children's use of literacy materials during their free play. Subjects, 17 children, one teacher, and one assistant teacher in one session of a Head Start located in the downtown of a small midwestern city, were observed during seven free play periods over 5 months. Data included observations, field notes, interviews, audiotapes, and videotapes. Observations and identification of types of play were made. Results indicated that the children: (1) engaged in several types of free play; (2) also initiated their own play themes and repeated some of these themes over several play periods; (3) incorporated literacy into their free play in several ways; and (4) communicated with each other and adults while using literacy materials. Findings suggest that children, including those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, can develop play themes and incorporate literacy into their play. These findings support other studies of children's natural use of literacy materials in play, and stand in contrast to researchers who advocate adult selection of play themes. (A table listing the types of dramatic/pretend play is included; 15 references are attached.) (RS)

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DRAMATIC PLAY AND LITERACY IN A HEAD START CLASSROOM

Running Head: DRAMATIC PLAY AND LITERACY

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DRAMATIC PLAY AND LITERACY IN A HEAD START CLASSROOM

Children's use of literacy materials related to specific themes provides information about their developing understanding of literacy (Hall, 1991). Researchers (Morrow and Rand, 1991; Vukelich, 1991) advocate adult selection of play themes (such as post office, bank, veterinarian's office etc.), and inclusion of theme specific literacy materials as a means of assisting children in this development.

There are three problems with this approach. First, children from non-mainstream groups (including low socioeconomic groups) who are unfamiliar with middle class play themes may not play in a way that brings about their understanding and development. Second, the basic nature of children's play (including topics and content) may be altered by the incorporation of themed centers into play. Third, there has been little research of children's spontaneous play.

Middle class themes are often incorporated in and advocated for play. Children from non-mainstream groups may have differing knowledge and experiences than middle class children (Heath, 1983). Lack of experience with topics and themes of play is in opposition to the theories of play which state that learning or expression of knowledge in play is due in part to the experiences and prior knowledge children bring to play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

Piaget (1962) describes symbolic play as part of the process

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of children developing equilibrium of assimilation and accommodation. Both past and present experiences are important in this process. Vygotsky (1978) explains that children's play is a zone of proximal development. Development occurs as the child negotiates themes and topics relevant to her/him based on experiences that the child has had.

The basic nature of children's play may be altered with the use of themed centers. Proponents argue that individual choice and creativity are left intact and that the adult role is that of facilitator (Hall, 1991; Christie, 1991), but children's creativity and choice is limited by an overarching topic of play suggested by a themed center.

Sutton-Smith (1985) comments that control is rooted in adult denial of the nature of children's play that has occurred over the last several hundred years. He comments that while parents (and most probably other adults) encourage their young children to play things like shopping and cooking these children are more likely to play going to the moon, monsters, etc. with their sisters and brothers (Sutton-Smith, 1985). Themed centers such as bank, store, etc. provide opportunities for experiences with the functional uses of literacy but they limit children's choices in play to a range of functional activities.

There has been little literacy research of children's spontaneous play. Christie (1990) states that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds rarely engage in dramatic play

without adult guidance (including selection of themes, observation, and interaction). Perhaps children's play is different rather than deficient. Young children's spontaneous inclusion of literacy into play relates to literacy experiences in home and community settings with adults and other children (Taylor, 1983). Research of young children's use of literacy in play in school settings needs to occur in order to better understand children's literacy development.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate one groups of non-mainstream (low socioeconomic status) children's use of literacy materials during their free play. Three questions guided this study. First, what types of free play do the children engage in, and does this play include dramatic/pretend play? Second, do the children incorporate literacy into their dramatic/pretend play and if so, how? Third, how do the children communicate with each other and with adults while using literacy materials in play?

METHODOLOGY

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

Seventeen children, one teacher, and one assistant teacher in one session of a Head Start located in the downtown of a small midwestern city participated in this study. Free play period was observed which included the children's use of the block, housekeeping, writing, and books and computer centers. Writing materials (including markers, pencils, and paper) were

located in the writing center and books were in the books and computer center. The children were allowed to move freely between the centers for the thirty to sixty minute period. The teacher and the assistant teacher rarely initiated play with the children but occasionally participated if the children requested.

DATA COLLECTION

The researcher was an observer in this study. Seven free play periods were observed from January through May. Observations lasted from thirty to sixty minutes. Data collection included observations, field notes, interviewing, audiotaping, and videotaping. Mini-cassestte recorders were placed in the play centers for audiotaping. Videotaping occurred on two occasions and was used in the process of observation.

Observations and identification of types of play were made. When dramatic/pretend play was identified it was followed for a period in order to observe whether literacy materials were incorporated. Repeated observation of some ongoing themes occurred. Rather than observe and record all dramatic/pretend play incorporating literacy, identified scenes were carefully observed and recorded.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis was framed by theories of emergent literacy (Teale and Sulzby, 1986) and sociosemiotics

(Halliday, 1978). Constant comparitive analysis (Strauss, 1987) including coding, memos, and category formation began as the data was collected.

RESULTS

Insert Table 1 about here

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1. TYPES OF PLAY

The children in this class engaged in several types of free play including blocks and puzzles, writing, reading, and child initiated dramatic/pretend play. This finding contradicts research indicating that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds rarely engage in dramatic play without some type of adult guidance (Christie, 1990). Eight to ten of the children in this class (both female and male) participated in dramatic/pretend play that occurred across centers during free play.

Children in this study initiated their own play themes and repeated some of these themes over several play periods. A broad theme (encompassing several related sub-themes) of problem solving in crisis situations was titled " Cops, Fireman, Rescue 911" by the children. Sub-themes included capturing criminals, processing criminals, and defusing bombs. Another play theme that was initiated, titled, and repeated by one childd was "Strawberryland." This theme focused on the

preparation of written materials related to attending a theme park similar to Disneyworld. The child prepared these materials (including tickets, brochures, and money) and explained that they were kept in a pocketbook in the housekeeping center.

Other child-initiated play themes were observed including shopping, garage sale, and traveling on a spaceship. These themes were observed occurring on one occasion each.

Children were able to develop and in multiple cases repeat themes. Themes were unique, multi-faceted, and related to the interests and experiences of the children engaged in them.

2. LITERACY IN DRAMATIC/PRETEND PLAY

The children incorporated literacy into their free play in several ways. Books were examined and writing materials were used at the writing center. Literacy was also incorporated into their dramatic/pretend play.

Blank paper and marker was used to construct tickets (those issued for various violations) and warrants during "Cops, Fireman, Rescue 911." These tickets and warrants were given by participants in the play to children and adults outside of the play. Writing was often a horizontal scribble across the paper. The computer was not turned on but was used as a processing terminal. Children imitated typing on the keyboard and processed criminals that were arrested. Alphabet cards were used as information sheets in processing.

Marker and blank construction paper were used to construct

tickets (used for admittance into the park), brochures, and money for "Strawberryland." These items were identified during an interview and were constructed (torn, cut, and written on) in different sizes with different markings to indicate the various purposes of the item.

Money was made in a similar manner and used for shopping. Books were used as a commodity during garage sale and were used as a prop in the spaceship.

Literacy was creatively incorporated into play by the children. This was done without the placement of literacy props into individual centers. Paper, pencil, books, and the computer were used in unique ways. Children sought out literacy materials when they wanted or needed them in play. While materials were located in two centers children were able to obtain and use them because they could move in and out of the centers freely.

COMMUNICATION

The children communicated with each other and adults while using literacy. This was done through written language, spoken language, and actions in play. Participants in play used written materials to communicate messages. An example of this can be found in the play occurring in "Cops, Fireman, Rescue 911." Warrants and tickets (written language) were used to send the message to others that they were to become a part of the play and to fulfill a certain role in the play.

Talk (spoken language) was commonly used as a means of

communication during dramatic/pretend play. In "Cops, Fireman, Rescue 911" commands (such as "You are under arrest." and "Come with me.") were coupled with the administration of a warrant. Questions were asked and requests were made during the shopping theme including asking for change. Commands were also made when one child directed the other as to what to purchase. The following excerpt provides an example of the talk between the children.

Cathy: Do we have enough?

Sarah: How much is it?
How much is it?

Cathy: Seventy dollars?

Sarah: I don't have that much.
I just have...
I just have...

(Cathy takes the money, makes an inaudible comment, and puts the money in the cash register.)

Sarah: Where's my change?
Where's my change?
Where's my change?
(said quickly)

(Cathy plays with the cash register for a short while.)

Cathy: (inaudible at first)... We have an apple orange.
(These are symbols on the cash register.)
Nineteen dollars.

Action accompanying the use of literacy materials also served as a means of communication. In "Cops, Fireman, Rescue 911" the children's exaggerated posturing (including hands on hips and striding) indicated their position as problem-

solvers. In the shopping play the first child was making money when the second child joined in. The second child got up after a short while and went to the housekeeping center. There she began to pick up various items. The first child watched curiously for a time and then directed the other child to buy only food. Each of the children had ideas of what the play was.

Children communicate purposes of play and individual roles through written and spoken communication and actions. Several types of dramatic play included multiple modes of communication.

CONCLUSIONS

Children, including those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, can develop play themes and incorporate literacy into their play. These findings support other studies of children's natural use of literacy materials in play (Taylor, 1983; Dyson, 1990).

These findings raise doubts about the value of adult selected thematic play centers. Children develop themes that are both relevant and of interest to them. At least one of the children who played "Cops, Fireman, Rescue 911" watched this type of show on television and the child preparing for a trip to "Strawberryland" discussed this adventure with her father.

Children were provided unlimited access to simple literacy materials (markers, paper, etc.) and other relevant props. They were not given literacy materials specific for each center.

Children creatively turned literacy materials into integral components of play that served to communicate meaning.

Further observational study of children's dramatic/ pretend play needs to occur in order to gain information about types of play and use of literacy materials. Studies of children from a variety of backgrounds will provide valuable information about topics of play, inclusion of literacy materials and activities, and literacy related communication.

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TABLE ONE

Types Of Dramatic/Pretend Play
And The Literacy Incorporated In Each

1. COPS	2. STRAWBERRYLAND	
warrants	money	
tickets	tickets	
processing criminals	brochures	
3. SHOPPING	**4. GARAGE SALE**	**5. SPACESHIP**
money	books	books